

Illicit Thrills and Dubious Pleasures



NES revitalized the U.S. gaming industry, turned a faded fad into a sustainable market. What **Nintendo** likes to gloss over was the shady black market lurking around its fringes, eager to scrape up a little loot by any means possible. Most visibly, that manifested in a thriving cottage industry of unlicensed games.

Easily recognizable by their distinct lack of the **NES Seal of Quality** (to say nothing of their generally amateurish art and weirdly shaped and colored cartridges), these bootleg releases were produced by companies that for various reasons chose to work outside of **Nintendo**'s mandatory licensing, manufacturing, and distribution models. Some were simply fly-by-night operations who didn't want to pony up the cash to go legit or whose work was too slipshod to clear **Nintendo**'s approvals process. Others were more respectable outlets who simply had political issues with the formal licensing process.

In any case, these unofficial publishers were a unique by-product of **Nintendo**'s overall business strategy. In the **Atari** VCS days, there were no licensees, and these games would have been released alongside blockbusters. **Nintendo** hoped to avoid another market implosion and employed its licensing rules in large part to ensure a certain minimum level of quality for the **NES** library. An admirable goal to be sure, though free-market advocates were less than enthusiastic about the means **Nintendo** used to enforce its rules: Merchants found selling unlicensed **NES** wares could have their distribution deals revoked. Given **Nintendo**'s popularity (and its near-monopoly on the console market), that would have been a disaster for a retailers' bottom lines. Later, it would become clear that loyalty through punitive threats isn't precisely the key to healthy business relationships... but for the **NES**'s heyday, it did the trick.

Because of their scarcity in the market (and, perhaps, their rebellious air), many of these unlicensed games have gained a certain cachet among **NES** fans. Certain titles sell for hundreds of dollars. Few of them are particularly good, though. That's the magic of collecting: The most valuable goods are rarely the best ones.

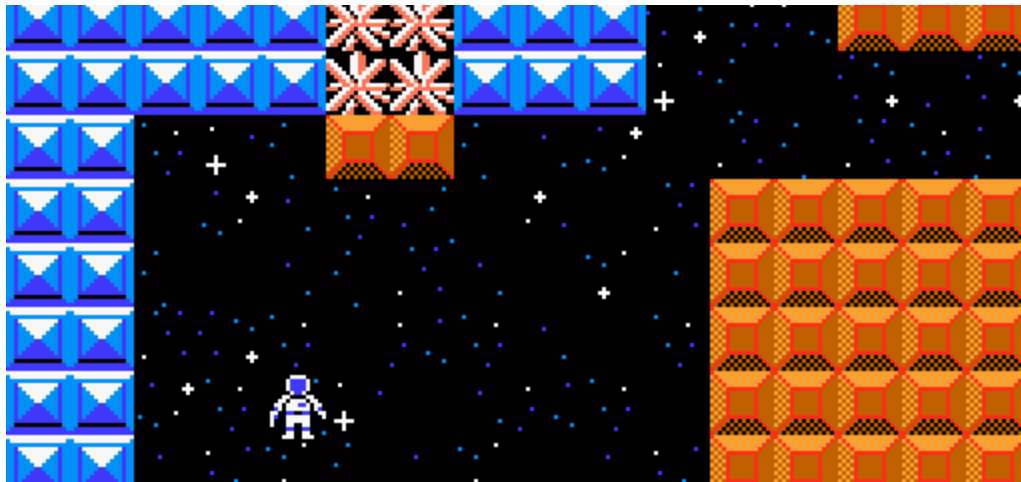


Active Enterprises

A virtual unknown during the **NES** era, Active Enterprises was that one company who took out magazine ads for an extravagantly expensive -- \$200! -- multicart called **Action 52**. One assumes that few gamers actually bought these collections, because the prospect of dropping 200 Reagan-era American dollars on a skeevy-looking ad was a bit much to ask of the largely teenaged **NES** fanbase.

To Active Enterprises' credit, its combo cartridge was genuinely different from the average pirate multicart: All 52 games were original creations rather than thinly-veiled swipes of first and second-gen **NES** titles. Unfortunately, few (if any) of those original creations were particularly fun, and most of them seemed downright unfinished.

That didn't stop the company from dreaming big dreams, though; the "star" of Action 52 was a game called **Cheetahmen**, which was clearly designed as an entry in the crowded field of **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** ripoffs -- a pipe dream, to say the least. Still, Active Enterprises developed a standalone sequel called **Cheetahmen II**, which was considered a myth of the 8-bit era until someone stumbled across thousands of unsold copies in a warehouse several years ago. Now the game is less myth than legend, and it's particularly popular among Japanese retro fans for its absolute shoddiness.



AGCI

American Video Game Cartridges, Inc. is wound up in a tangled web of the **NES** underworld, such as it was. According to a history of the company published at NESWorld.com, its key player was a guy named *Richard Frick*, who entered the sordid world of unlicensed **NES** games during his time at Tengen, was a key player in Macronix (who manufactured most unlicensed American carts), and eventually departed to establish a completely different **NES** black marketeer, AVE. Meanwhile, AGCI's games were built on technology licensed (somewhat ironically, really) from Color Dreams, and were later sold off AVE.

Really, the whole thing is incredibly incestuous. The truly inexplicable part about AGCI is that its library of titles that actually saw "release" saw a whopping three games were all old arcade titles licensed from Exidy. The oldest of them, **Death Race**, dated way back into the '70s. Another, an **NES** conversion of the light gun torture game **Chiller**, is remarkable simply for being the most graphically violent game on the **NES**, requiring players to dismember imprisoned humans with the use of the Zapper.

AGCI probably isn't the strangest of all the unlicensed **NES** developers to come along in the day, but it certainly wasn't for any lack of trying.



American Video Entertainment

American Video Entertainment was, without question, the godfather of the unlicensed **NES** scene. Though perhaps not as ambitious or prolific as Tengen, AVE also lacked the backing of a major corporation like **Atari**, the resources to buy the rights to games like **Afterburner** and **Pac-Man**, and never had an **NES** licensee. On the contrary, AVE was designed specifically to create and distribute original **NES** games outside of the standard **Nintendo** channels. And, unlike most of its black market peers, AVE's work wasn't completely awful.

Ultimately, AVE was responsible for releasing nearly 20 titles into the U.S. market, and the games were all over the place. There were the simplistic puzzle- and arcade-style games with ambitious names like **Puzzle**. There were established properties, like Epyx's **Impossible Mission II**. There were more ambitious original titles like **F-15 City War** and **Krazy Kreatures**. AVE also licensed Panesian's softcore puzzler **Bubble Bath Babes**, bowdlerized it, and sold it as **Mermaids of Atlantis**. There was even a shot at legitimacy: AVE teamed up with the AMA to create an anti-drug platformer called **Wally Bear and the NO! Gang**. They may have been off-the-radar, but AVE was fighting the good fight. All told, it was quite the operation. Heck, they even *sued* **Nintendo**.

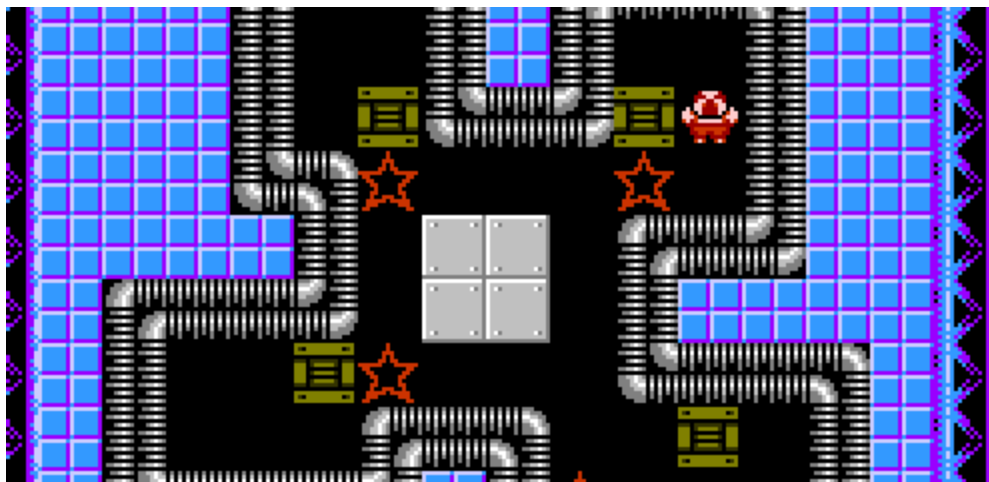
But all good (or at least not-entirely-terrible) things must come to an end, and AVE was ultimately shut down by the heat death of the 8-bit gaming market. 16-bit game design proved to be a bit beyond AVE's scrounged-together resources, and the company closed its doors once consumers shifted their focus to the **Genesis** and **Super NES**.



Camerica

Camerica's an interesting case: It was largely affiliated with British publisher **Codemasters**, bringing quite a number of the company's better products to the U.S. Most notable among these was **Dizzy**, the Oliver brother's tragically fragile egg-man hero. In fact, I've heard rumors that "Camerica" was secretly short for "**Codemasters** America" and that the unlicensed publishing arm was simply a discreet way for the more reputable company to dip its toe in the money end of the gaming pool. This, however, appears to be entirely apocryphal.

For those not weaned on (or interested in) Spectrum games, Camerica's greatest feat as a publisher was its curious **Aladdin Deck Enhancer** system, which offered a low-cost alternative cartridge format by creating a GamePak-shaped adapter that plugged into the **NES** console and accepted individual games as smaller carts. The Aladdin deck contained all the essential, non-game-specific components of an **NES** cart -- the security chip, the graphics chip, etc. -- the individual mini-carts need offer nothing more than the ROM for each individual title. It was actually a clever idea, and might actually have gained some traction had Camerica been able to enjoy the full support of proper retail channels.



Caltron

Probably the most obscure of all the unlicensed publishers from the **NES**'s golden era, Caltron was apparently based in Taiwan and released only a single title in the U.S., the eponymous **Caltron 6-in-1**. Outside of Stadium Events and the **NES** World Championship giveaway carts, Caltron 6-in-1 has become the most expensive game in the **NES** library. This didn't do much good for Caltron, of course, but it's a godsend for any gamer who had the perspicacity to pick up the company's sole release back in the day.

Like most sketchy Asian multicarts, Caltron 6-in-1 mostly consists of hacked-together clones of early **NES** and arcade games like **Balloon Fight**, **Pang**, and **Space Harrier**. But because it was produced in tiny, hard-to-find quantities, these sloppy clones sell for far more than the superior original games. Making this one of those games that causes collectors to pause, take stock of their collections, take inventory of their lives, and weep openly.



Color Dreams/Bunch Games/Wisdom Tree

The folks behind Color Dreams may not have been able to design a decent videogame to save their lives, but by god were they clever people.

You have to admire their audacity. This is the company responsible for some of the worst games ever published for **NES** -- a mere half-step up from the fare in **Action 52** -- and yet they dared to create a sub-label, Bunch Games, for the releases that weren't quite up to Color Dreams' high standards. That kind of audacity takes genuine chutzpah.... or a total lack of perspective.

After toiling in the bootleg market for a few years and failing to convince hardcore **NES** fans that there was something worth playing in those tacky baby blue carts, Color Dreams reinvented itself into the Christian-oriented Wisdom Tree. Existing games like the smutty **Menace Beach** were given holy-roller facelifts; games in development, including the legendary Z-80-equipped **Hellraiser**, were abandoned or, rumor has it, destroyed in a fire in the style a good, old-fashioned book burning.

Jesus made Wisdom Tree untouchable. **Nintendo**, already on touchy ground as a Japanese giant in America's Japanophobic phase, didn't dare press legal charges against a company peddling God's Word in **NES** form. And the religious themes of Wisdom Tree's games gave the company a completely unique distribution channel: Christian bookstores. This fascinating mix of sincere religious zeal and calculated business pragmatism helped Wisdom Tree thrive well beyond the point at which other unlicensed **NES** publishers were forced to shut down... in fact, the company still exists, selling its old **NES** games (and new ones, too) on **PC**.



Panesian/Hacker International

Panesian's trio of releases has something of a mythic reputation. They were rarely seen in stores, and they were semi-pornographic. Yes, Panesian sold puzzle games frosted with a light glaze of titillation, the spiritual predecessors of naughty **Qix** clones like **Gals Panic** on Acade Video Game machine and an ocean of strip mahjongg titles.

As for myself, it wasn't until the Internet's ROM trading scene discovered these games and started sniggering about the hilarity of tiny pixellated breasts that I realized **Bubble Bath Babes** and its sorority sisters were actually uncommon. I'd always assumed otherwise; the video rental shop nearest my house carried all three games, available for rental right there with all the other **NES** games -- 16 shelves of licensed, non-pornographic **NES** releases. Whose bright idea that was I'll never know, but the Panesian trilogy sat there, collecting dust for years; presumably, everyone else was just as embarrassed about their existence as I was.

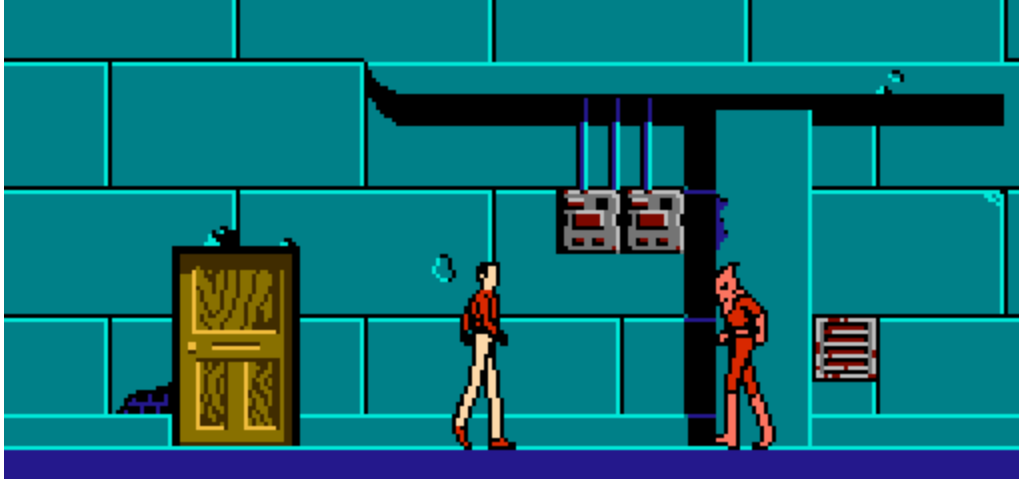
These games are considerably less scarce in **Famicom** format, at least if Akihabara is anything to go by. Lucky Lucy gets around, it seems.



Sachen

Sachen was the TOSE of **NES** bootleg publishers, the Sachen catalog consisted largely of Chinese-made clone games and original titles of dubious quality... though this didn't stop the likes of Color Dreams (**Master Chu, Metal Fighter**) and AVE (**Tiles of Fate, F-15 City War**) from buying the U.S. publishing rights to that work regardless. In fact, Sachen had a hand in dozens of unofficial **NES** releases, though these were rarely released under the company's own name.

While Sachen appears to no longer be in business, its closing is relatively recent, a development that happened within the past decade. The company coasted along for years after the **NES**'s glory days not so much on its games (though those did well enough for Sachen to expand into **Game Boy** development) but rather on its clone hardware. The most famous of these is the **Q-Boy**, a Famiclone modeled after the **NES**'s redesigned hardware, colored like a classic **iMac**, and capable of playing both built-in Sachen games as well as **Famicom** and **NES** carts.



Tengen

While the entire business of unlicensed **NES** games is all about being sneaky, forcing publishers to dabble in bootlegging and other grey-market shadiness, Tengen deserves special mention for its devotion to the art of shiftiness. Its relationship with **Nintendo** and **NES** was above and beyond the call of sneaky duty.

Perhaps that shouldn't be a surprise; after all, Tengen was a subsidiary of **Atari**, the console giant whom **Nintendo** supplanted. So maybe it was just to be expected that they'd be skulking around the perimeter of **Nintendo**'s new empire. But still: Tengen was very briefly a **Nintendo** licensee, just long enough to reverse-engineer the **NES lock-out chip** and develop a legally questionable workaround. **Nintendo** sued, of course. But that didn't keep Tengen's games off the shelves.

Good thing, too, because unlike other unlicensed publishers, Tengen produced some great stuff. Many of its games were designed in-house by experienced **Atari** veterans like *Franz X. Lanzinger* (**Crystal Castles**); the rest were licensed from competing publishers like **Namco** and **Sega**.

Atari, **Namco**, and **Sega** had a few things in common, but the thread that bound them all was their rocky relationship with **Nintendo**. **Atari** had been replaced by **Nintendo**, whereas **Sega** was a contemporary rival. **Namco**, on the other hand, had been **Nintendo**'s first **Famicom** licensee and enjoyed special privileges; the company was allowed to manufacture its own cartridges and didn't have to abide by **Nintendo**'s annual five-game release limit.

Most Japanese game shops shelf **Namco Famicom** games separately from the rest, since they have distinctive packaging and clearly belong to a unique series. Unfortunately, **Nintendo** eventually revoked **Namco**'s privileges, driving a wedge between the former partners.

In Tengen, all three companies found a way to enjoy the best of both worlds. They could release their games for **NES** in America, skimming the top of the **Nintendo** gravy train, yet they didn't have to pay **Nintendo** a cent in royalties. It was the ultimate act of rebellion. And best of all, most of Tengen's **NES** releases hovered somewhere between good and excellent, so even gamers profited.

Unfortunately, Tengen's grand scheme was eventually undone as **Nintendo** redirected some of that shiftiness right back at Tengen, using **Tetris** as its fulcrum. The tale of Tetris is impossibly complicated, which is why it's easy to believe that Tengen produced hundreds of thousands of copies of the game for **NES** confident in the belief that they'd secured the rights to the next big thing. Unfortunately, **Atari** bought the rights to Tetris from someone who only had authorization to give the OK for **PC** versions of the game... leaving **Nintendo** free to maneuver its way to wrapping up the console and portable rights. Ultimately, **Nintendo** was able to exact its revenge against Tengen by forcing them to recall countless unsold copies of the game, a devastating setback for the company.

The Tetris debacle wasn't the end for Tengen, though. The company soldiered on for several years, even publishing a handful of **Genesis** games. But the legal battering it suffered for both its devious workarounds and its mistakes of good faith defanged **Atari's NES** venture, and Tengen went quiet into that good night when **Time Warner** bought back the rights to **Atari** in 1993.